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FINAL NATIONAL FOREST MARIJUANA CULTIVATOR SENTENCED TO 144 MONTHS IN FEDERAL PRISON

PHOENIX – Javier Mendoza-Cuevas, 34, of Phoenix, was sentenced by U.S. District Judge Susan R. Bolton to 144 months in federal prison on December 15, 2008. Mendoza-Cuevas pleaded guilty on May 28, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands. He is the final defendant to be sentenced of 11 defendants associated with one or more of the many 2007 marijuana garden investigations who were arrested and prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office in the District of Arizona.

Over the course of the 2007 marijuana growing season, the Gila County Narcotics Task Force, Gila County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Forest Service and the Drug Enforcement Administration located, investigated, and eradicated several marijuana cultivation sites, referred to as "gardens," on National Forest Lands in Arizona. These gardens were all located in rugged, remote areas of the forest lands away from forest roads and most trails. All of the gardens investigated in 2007 were operated in the same way. The garden operators transported undocumented aliens to the gardens, supplied them with tents and tarps for shelter, provided them with food, and supplied them with tools, fertilizer, irrigation tubing and other supplies to plant, tend and harvest the marijuana plants. The garden workers remained embedded in the forest, in some cases for months at a time, to work the gardens. Supervisors of the gardens periodically traveled to the gardens to resupply the workers with food and other supplies necessary for the continued operation of the gardens.

Mendoza-Cuevas was found to be a supervisor of at least two of the gardens in the Tonto National Forest which were eradicated in 2007. During the eradication of those two gardens, law enforcement agents counted and destroyed over 16,000 marijuana plants, arrested four garden workers, and recovered two firearms. Mendoza-Cuevas supervised the gardens by providing supplies to the embedded workers. A search warrant served at Mendoza-Cuevas' Phoenix residence recovered six firearms, jars of marijuana seeds, fertilizer, irrigation tubing, and some loose marijuana. Additionally, two men arrested at the time of the search warrant were identified by agents as men seen fleeing from one of the gardens as agents were moving in to eradicate the marijuana plants.

Other defendants prosecuted and sentenced include:

Jose Tapia Varelas, 21, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 120 months in federal prison on August 14, 2008. He pleaded guilty on April 15, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Filiberto Franco-Chavez, 28, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 57 months in federal prison on September 2, 2008. Franco-Chavez pleaded guilty on April 15, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

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Rigoberto Mendoza-Guesar, 49, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 57 months in federal prison on September 2, 2008. Rigoberto Mendoza-Guesar pleaded guilty on May 28, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Jose Valencia-Hernandez, 23, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 30 months in federal prison on July 23, 2008. Valencia-Hernandez pleaded guilty on May 1, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Adrian Quiroz-Gutierrez, 44, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 26 months in federal prison on November 26, 2008. Quiroz-Gutierrez pleaded guilty on June 12, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Ignacio Mendoza-Guesar, 52, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 24 months in federal prison on October 7, 2008. Ignacio Mendoza-Guesar pleaded guilty on June 10, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Jesus Tapia Lopez, 21, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison on August 13, 2008. Jesus Tapia Lopez pleaded guilty on April 17, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Disadoro Tapia Lopez, 44, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison on August 15, 2008. Disadoro Tapia Lopez pleaded guilty on April 18, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Anastacio Aguilar Garcia, 50, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison on August 15, 2008. Aguilar Garcia pleaded guilty on April 17, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

Juan Carlos Sandoval Barragan, 22, of Michoacan, Mexico, was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison on August 15, 2008. Sandoval-Barragan pleaded guilty on April 16, 2008, to Conspiracy to Cultivate Marijuana on National Forest Lands.

The investigation in this case was conducted by Gila County Narcotics Task Force, Gila County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Forest Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Phoenix Police Department. The prosecution was handled by Glenn McCormick, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix.

CASE NUMBER: CR-07-1178-PHX-SRB, CR-07-1136-PHX-EHC, CR-07-1135-PHX-NVW, and CR-07-1249-PHX-MHM
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